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The Finance Commission of the City of Boston
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October 4, 1940

The Finance Commission was asked by the Mayor to assist in the preparation of a petition to the War Department for a reopening of the Meridian Street bridge situation.

Attached is a letter submitted for presentation to the War Department. It contains facts and conclusions which give a correct understanding of the situation.

1. State Legislation
Maguire Bill
2. Federal Aid
see attached memo for
as to statute
3. Don't let Chelsea
take control of
hearing
4 General
5. C Adams -
6 Rob Peabody - explain purpose

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September 1940

The Honorable
The Secretary of War
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

The City of Boston has the honor to represent to you that it desires to present to the Department certain facts relative to the Meridian Street bridge over Chelsea Creek, a portion of Boston Harbor, additional to those presented at a hearing held by the Engineering Service of the Department on September 15, 1939, and to request that you order a further hearing upon the matter as soon as reasonably possible, at which said facts may be presented.

In support of this request, and in order that the position which the City will take at such hearing may be clear, I have the honor to submit to you a short summary of the additional facts hereinbefore referred to, and in addition certain other facts previously established which in my opinion were not given their full weight by the Department.

The position of the City in reference to the matter is as follows:

The order of the Department issued consequent upon the hearing of September 15, 1939, under date of April 13, 1940, and served upon me as Mayor of the City on April 30, 1940 requires that the City "provide a drawspan affording a horizontal clearance of 175 ft."

The City desires that said order be rescinded on the following grounds:-

1. That compliance with the order will involve the City in an expenditure in excess of $2,000,000, which it can ill afford.

2. That the City derives no substantial benefit as a result of such expenditure.

3. That no other municipality derives substantial benefit as a result of such expenditure.

4. That no government agency or private party derives benefit from such expenditure commensurate therewith.

5. That there is no present necessity for the clearance required by the order.

6. The proposed clearance of 175 ft. will affect navigation in only that part of Chelsea Creek down stream from the Chelsea Street bridge.

The City further desires that if said order be not rescinded, the effective date thereof be extended or the horizontal clearance of the draw be reduced, for the following reasons:-

7. Legislation being necessary before the bridge can be rebuilt, and the General Court of this Commonwealth meeting now in 1941 and again in 1943, it is difficult to obtain the necessary legislation from the 1941 Legislature due to the time necessary to prepare plans for the new bridge, and impossible to complete a new bridge before April 30, 1943 if the necessary legislation be obtained from the 1943 Legislature.

8. Reduction in the required width will save the City a substantial sum.

The City further desires that if the said order be not finally rescinded, it be temporarily annulled in such manner that a new order may be passed after such procedure and in such manner that the Secretary of War may be placed in the position that if he deems it desirable, he may provide for contribution to the cost of a new Meridian Street bridge under Public Statute No. 647, Seventy-Sixth Congress.

I have the honor to submit the following facts in support of certain of the grounds above described:

Ground 1. The drawspan of the present Meridian Street bridge was constructed in 1912. It is in need of substantial repair. The estimated cost thereof is in excess of $200,000. The bridge is 1,252 ft. long and as all but a very few feet at the northern end of the bridge is in the city limits, Boston will theoretically have to bear nearly all the cost of repair. The City of Chelsea is having financial difficulty. Recently it was necessary for Boston to compromise the amount of money due for existing bridges between Boston and Chelsea for the years 1934 to 1939. Therefore, as a practical matter, regardless of what stipulations may be placed in the law authorizing the construction of the bridge, Boston will have to meet more than its allotted share of the construction costs. At the present time Boston is prepared to make the necessary repairs wholly at its own expense in the year 1941, despite the fact that the portion of this burden should be borne by Chelsea.

If an opening of 175 ft. is insisted on by the War Department, a twin bascule draw will have to be substituted for the present rotating draw. New piers and abutments will have to be constructed and the additional width of channel dredged, presumably by the War Department at its own expense. The level of the bridge will have to be raised about 9 ft. This will require a complete rebuilding, and

on the Chelsea side at least, land takings. It will require the construction of a temporary bridge. No estimate is made of the cost of land takings, but the Public Works Department of Boston estimates the cost of a new bridge at not less than $1,700,000, and the cost of a temporary bridge at about $250,000.

The tax rate of the City of Boston in 1940 is $40.60 per $1,000 of valuation. This is the highest tax rate of any of the large cities of the country. And this does not tell the whole story because the valuations on which this tax rate is established are in dispute and even if the contentions of those who have appeals pending are sustained only in part the tax rate on the revised valuations will be still higher. Many people believe that the tax rate on true valuations would be substantially over $50.00 on the thousand. For several years the City has been unable to collect, in any year, within ten million dollars of the amount of taxes levied. The tax burden, therefore, is now greater than the taxpayers can bear. Although the debt burden of the City is not as great per capita as it is in some of the other large cities, any further increase in it will mean additional tax rate burden. To be compelled, therefore, to construct a bridge of the character required by the War Department order, will prove a great hardship to the taxpayers of the City of Boston.

Ground 2. The greater portion of the Boston shore of Chelsea Creek is now unoccupied. There are only three substantial mercantile interests with plants along this shore: the Boston Sand & Gravel Company and two oil farms. There is little likelihood that it ever will be occupied so long as oil farms are clustered along both shores. A large residential area adjoins the shore on the Boston side, which will make it unwise and impossible to further increase oil farm development on the Boston shore. As a result, Boston can expect little additional development of a taxable nature along that part of

Chelsea Creek within the city limits, and the widening of the clearance of the Meridian Street bridge would have no appreciable effect upon the existing situation.

To be sure, the City could increase the assessment upon the two oil farms in its limits, but not to any commensurate extent.

Ground 3. There are five or six oil farms in Chelsea and Revere which together front on the north side of the Creek. Both cities will probably receive increased revenue from increased assessments upon the oil farms inside their boundaries, but otherwise their positions are identical with that of Boston.

Ground 4. The Treasury Department has a lighthouse and lightship depot in Chelsea inside and very close to the Meridian Street bridge. Vessels attached to it pass through the bridge. Sometimes Coast Guard cutters are moored at its wharf. The Treasury Department was not present at the September 15, 1939 hearing, and has taken no part in the matter at all. It seems obvious that it is not seeking a wider clearance.

The only private interests benefited are about eight of the major oil companies in the United States, as for instance, the Standard Oil Company of New York, the Texas Company, and the Sun Oil Company. These companies own the only large vessels navigating Chelsea Creek. They move approximately 85% in tonnage of the shipments through the Meridian Street draw. They are the only interests which will derive any substantial benefit from the widened span, and their benefit, so far as I can ascertain, will be largely derived from an ability to use longer and wider tankers than those heretofore used. It seems unfair to the City of Boston to condemn it to an

expenditure of over $2,000,000 in order that some eight nationwide oil companies, only two of which have farms located in Boston, may transport their oil to their farms in somewhat greater bulk and at a slightly less cost. They are now navigating Chelsea Creek with tankers, the largest of which are approximately 450 ft. long and with a beam between 66.5 and 68 ft. They are doing this with safety, but owing to the tortuous channel below the bridge, at some inconvenience and cost. No possible savings which they might realize by, is commensurate with the cost of, a 175-ft. horizontal drawspan in the Meridian Street bridge.

Furthermore, the oil companies built their farms on the shores of the Creek knowing its limitations for navigation. It is not reasonable to expect that the public will invest unreasonable sums of money to meet the requirements of a few special interests. Navigation in the Creek having been proven to be safe and adequate by its many years of satisfactory use, it is more reasonable to expect the oil companies to meet the conditions as they find them, than to expect an overburdened municipality to go into debt for their express convenience.

The Commissioner of Public Works of Boston has estimated that if your Department insists on compliance with the order, it will cost the City of Boston $400 for every oil tanker passing through the draw. No possible advantage derived from the additional clearance is worth this price.

Ground 5. Evidence on this ground was submitted at the September 15, 1939 hearing. The salient point is that over 400,000 passages of all kinds have been made through the draw in 28 years with only one serious accident. There is no reason to-day why this record should not be continued.

Ground 6. The present drawspan in the Meridian Street bridge providing 100-ft. horizontal clearance corresponds with the horizontal clearance in the Chelsea Street bridge which is approximately 4600 ft. further up the Creek. It provides 30 ft. more clearance than the Boston & Albany Railroad trestle which is located approximately 70 ft. beyond the Chelsea Street bridge. It follows that a tanker having a 75-ft. beam, while it might be able to enter the draw of the Chelsea Street bridge, obviously can not pass through the Boston & Albany Railroad trestle. The wider clearance, therefore, at the Meridian Street bridge will provide access for the larger tankers only to the oil farms located between Meridian Street bridge and the Chelsea Street bridge. Within a period of a few years the Federal Government approved the plan of the Chelsea Street bridge containing provision for 100-ft. drawspan and authorized its construction as a P.W.A. project. There was no suggestion at that time of changing the channel lines, or of providing for passage of larger tankers in the Creek.

Ground 7. The order served on the City of Boston is dated April 13. Inasmuch as a bridge to replace the Meridian Street bridge would have one end in Boston and the other end in the municipality of Chelsea, authority for its construction and for the

apportionment of costs must be obtained from the Massachusetts Legislature. The City of Boston can not take land in or use streets of Chelsea without special authority. Because Massachusetts has biennial sessions of the Legislature, there was no session in 1940. The 1941 Legislature meets in January, 1941. To work out plans for a new bridge, estimates, and the terms of an enabling statute, will take time. The bill for the statute will not of necessity have to be introduced in January, 1941, but late introduction will jeopardize passage.

Of course, 1943 legislation would be too late.

In connection with Public Statute No. 647, I have the honor to point out that this statute did not become operative until June 21, 1940, and that under its terms it will be impossible for the Secretary of War, even if he were so minded, to allocate any proportion of the cost of the Meridian Street bridge to the Federal Government. This is due to the fact that the procedure preliminary to the issue of the April 13, 1940 order was taken before the Act was passed, and was substantially at variance with the procedure outlined in the Act. I have the honor to suggest that if you are unwilling to give the City of Boston any relief from the present onerous order of April 13, 1940, at least you suspend that order and take the preliminary steps provided under Public Statute No. 647, so that you may place yourself in position to take advantage of it.

I am fully aware that the Act refers to railroad bridges, and that there is a considerable question as to whether or not the Boston Elevated Railway can be considered a railroad. Nevertheless, the object sought to be attained by the Act is as applicable to street

railways as it is to steam railroads, and there is a possibility that the Act will be broadened to cover street railways. I should appreciate it if, failing other modifications, you would be willing to place this project as nearly under the terms of the Act as possible.

In this connection, I have the honor further to suggest that the whole matter be placed in abeyance until it be determined whether or not Public Statute No. 647 will be amended so as to clearly permit Federal contributions and, if possible, also provide for contributions by the oil companies; and if so, in what way, so that release may be made of Federal and oil company funds to reimburse the City of Boston for this expenditure.

Finally, I have the honor to invite your attention to another matter which I have previously mentioned only in passing. I am informed that the United States has already paid between $750,000 and $1,000,000 in the last few years in deepening the present channel. Nevertheless, the present channel at and near the bridge is only 100 ft. wide. To require of the City that it give a 175-ft. clearance implies an intention of the War Department to dredge the channel to a width of 175 ft. This will involve somewhat of a relocation of the channel and will probably raise engineering problems which will have to be solved before legislation can be obtained.

It will also involve a substantial additional expenditure by the Federal Government to dredge the channel to the width made available by the widened drawspan. In the opinion of my Public Works Department, which is based, of course, only on their estimate of where the War Department will eventually wish to locate the drawspan, the altered channel will make useless a substantial portion of the recent

dredging on the north side of the channel below the bridge. Such a result would be unfortunate. I have, therefore, the honor to suggest that careful consideration be given to the question as to whether new supplementary dredging on the north side of the channel would not be the best means of eliminating the difficulty encountered in the use of the span in its present condition. The alleged difficulty is that vessels are compelled to approach the present draw at an angle, and that there is little room to straighten out so as properly to go through the draw, at right angles to the bridge. I am informed that additional dredging would increase the area in which vessels can maneuver and would thus lessen, if not wholly obviate, the difficulty. In view of the objections hereinbefore outlined to the alternative scheme of widening the horizontal clearance to 175 ft., I have the honor to urge that the possibility of achieving the desired result by additional dredging be thoroughly r explored before a decision be reached necessitating the expenditure of so large an amount by my City for an object so slightly beneficial to so few of its inhabitants or taxpayers.

LAW DEPARTMENT OF THE CITY OF BOSTON
INTER-OFFICE MEMORANDUM

DATE December 14, 1940

TO Mr. Cutler

FROM Mr. Hopkins

SUBJECT Meridian Street bridge alteration

Mr. Loeffler of the Municipal Research Bureau says that he has already talked with Mr. Charles Francis Adams who has agreed to be present. He has given Mr. Adams a memorandum of the facts and issues, and he also expects to talk with him Monday afternoon. Mr. Loeffler feels that if you can talk with Mr. Adams on the telephone Monday morning and tell him that we also are anxious to have him speak it will help the whole thing.

Mr. Loeffler also said that a number of months ago Messrs. Cunniff and Storey got Walter Channing in as a representative of the Municipal Research Bureau, and that Walter Channing also expects to speak at this hearing for our proposition. Loeffler does not know how long he will speak, but suspects that he will be very short. I have also been in touch with George Hyland, and we are all working together. Storey was out, but I will talk with him on Monday.

R.H.H. R.H.H.

1. Not nec 175 ft chan to enable to get thru bridge

2. 92 ft channel w/ table Ok — $ 114 000

3. uncertain how 8 ft for

2 man